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Women's health advocates sound alarms as Texas anti-abortion bill advances

By [Taylor Goldenstein](#)

Planned Parenthood and its supporters are warning that a new Texas anti-abortion bill will lead to even fewer low-income women receiving sexually transmitted disease testing, cancer screenings, contraception and other women's health services.

When the Texas Legislature in 2011 slashed funding for Planned Parenthood and other abortion providers, the women's health safety net took a severe hit, studies and other reports show.

The number of patients receiving care in state-funded programs declined from a high of 320,000 in 2010 to 220,000 in 2017, the most recent state data available. About 1.8 million low-income Texans are thought to be eligible for services.

Despite a slight rebound in 2014 when the state rolled out new programs, the state is still serving 100,000 fewer patients than it did in 2010 prior to the legislation.

Now, Planned Parenthood has joined some Texas city and county leaders in warning that women's health will be set back yet again if Senate Bill 22 becomes law.

The bill, sponsored by Sen. Donna Campbell, R-New Braunfels and nineteen other senators, [would block state and local tax dollars](#) from going to abortion providers and their affiliates. The bill [is a top priority](#) for Lt. Gov. Dan Patrick this legislative session, passed out of committee on a unanimous vote Monday.

"Taxpayers who oppose abortion shouldn't have to see their tax dollars subsidizing the industry," Campbell said.

While lawmakers already block state funds from going to abortion providers and affiliates per a budget amendment, this bill would cement that restriction without the need for new amendments every budget cycle. It would also extend the funding prohibition to local governments.

The bill would ban any governmental entity from engaging in transactions — such as a sale, purchase, lease or donation — with an abortion provider or affiliate.

The proposed legislation would also prohibit advocacy or lobbying on behalf of the providers' or their affiliates. It would not apply to a licensed hospital, a licensed physician who performs fewer than 50 abortions per year, a state hospital, a teaching hospital or an accredited residency program.

"SB 22 ties the hands of local government at a time when cities and counties already face significant challenges in providing access to quality, affordable health care for their residents," Yvonne Gutierrez, executive director of Planned Parenthood Texas Votes said at a press conference prior to a public hearing on the bill Monday. "The legislature has already prevented Planned Parenthood from providing care to Texas women to disastrous effect."

The full scope of the bill's implications is unclear. An example of a transaction threatened by the bill is [Planned Parenthood's lease with the city of Austin](#) at a \$1-a-year rate that's been in place since the '70s. The city regularly provides such discounts to nonprofits, such as animal shelter Austin Pets Alive.

In 2017, the Planned Parenthood facility on East Seventh Street provided services, such as cancer screenings, birth control and HIV and STD testing, to more than 5,000 people, the organization said in a press release.

Mayor Steve Adler and Austin City Council members spoke in support of the partnership at a press conference held at the building Monday.

"The state reaching down into Austin to talk about how best to provide health care in our community is an overreach," Adler said. "It is a preemption that goes against the ability of local communities to decide what is best in their neighborhoods."

At the public hearing Monday, Jennifer Allmon, executive director of the Texas Catholic Conference of Bishops, and other supporters of the bill said it aligns with their moral values. More than a dozen people spoke, all but a few in support of the bill.

"Time and time again, the people of Texas have made it abundantly clear that our citizens have a tremendous respect for unborn human life," Allmon said. "This bill ensures our tax dollars are not used in violation of the most basic principle of our union: that all people are guaranteed a right to life."

Presented with data showing women's access to care suffered after the 2011 cuts, Sen. Jane Nelson, R-Flower Mound, said at the hearing that the Legislature "has invested more money in women's health to provide more services to more women than we ever have in the history of this state, and we have more providers than we ever have."

According to the Legislative Budget Board, the state spent \$142 million on women's health in fiscal year 2017, up from \$105 million in fiscal year 2010, including federal sources. And the state has added more than 3,000 providers between fiscal years 2010 and 2016. Despite those changes, the state in 2017 served 100,000 fewer women than in 2010, state data show.

“Now (that) it is not flowing through an organization that some people would prefer is their problem,” Nelson said. “My problem and our) problem is making sure women get the appropriate health care that they need, and we are doing that.”

While the cities of Houston and San Antonio said they had no direct contracts with Planned Parenthood, officials said the bill could have detrimental effects to future partnerships. Bill Kelly, Houston’s director of government relations, said Planned Parenthood Gulf Coast is the second-largest safety net provider in Harris County.

“If we were to have — which is not out of the realm of possibilities — a Zika outbreak or something that could typically affect women of reproductive age, the prohibition against coordinating with a safety net provider in a public health emergency just seems completely against what people would expect their government to do,” Kelly said.

He added that the wording of the provision banning lobbying is vague and could potentially hinder the city from advocating for nonpartisan issues like disease prevention funding.

“Are we going to not support additional state resources to folks with HIV/AIDS in our community simply because Planned Parenthood also agrees with us?” Kelly said. “It just seems like a completely nonsensical requirement.”

Former Sen. Wendy Davis, now-executive director of the nonprofit Deeds Not Words, known for her 2013 filibuster of anti-abortion legislation, also spoke against the bill Monday.

Davis said the impact of cuts to family planning funding for providers like Planned Parenthood had dramatic effects on women’s health care, such as increasing teenage birth rates and maternal mortality, harming “tens and thousands of real, living, human women who went without health care as a consequence.”

“This is not a bill that seeks to continue state defunding — that has already happened,” Davis said. “Instead, this is a bill that seeks to interfere with a local community’s decision to make what it believes are the best health care decisions for people that live in their local communities.”

<https://www.houstonchronicle.com/news/politics/texas/article/Women-s-health-advocates-sound-alarms-as-Texas-13700770.php>